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Alethea Surland

Cedarville University, asurland@cedarville.edu

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Alethea Surland

Dr. Wood

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Analyzing Martha McMillan's Involvement in her Children's Spiritual and Catechetical Growth

From January 15, 1867 to August 1913, Martha McMillan composed an impressive collection of forty-six journals detailing her life every day until two weeks prior to her death. She began writing her life's account on the day of her marriage to John McMillan, or "Mr. Mc." as she referred to him in her journals. Her daily entries covered a range of events, including comments on her community, her family, the workers at her farm, and the sermon notes she religiously recorded whenever she attended church. The journals intimately familiarize readers with a woman who lived on a farm in Cedarville Ohio and the changes that occurred around and to her. Specifically, Martha dedicated much of her writing to her children and their spiritual growth. While the religious context of Martha's entries permeates her journals, this essay will analyze the entries written May through July of Martha's 1884 journal. A close examination of these months will delve into Martha McMillan's maternal concern and involvement in her children's spirituality and the emphasis placed into each child's spiritual growth that arose from Martha's own religious edification.

The unveiling of Martha's character through the summer months of 1884 reveals a mother deeply concerned with the whereabouts of her children on the Sabbath during church. Church attendance, for Martha, was highly significant. In Laurel Ulrich's analysis, *Virtuous Women Found*, Ulrich claims, "A virtuous woman loved to go to church" (Ulrich 23). Similarly,

Martha reveled in the Sunday services at church as evidenced by her meticulous recording of each week's selected text from the bible. For example, Martha wrote on May 11, 1884, "Mr. Morton's text "And he dreamed and beheld a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven – and beheld the angels of God ascending and descending upon it"" (McMillan 1884). However, neither Martha nor her children managed to attend church every Sabbath, and if any of them missed the service, Martha noted it in her journal. She considered it a priority to arrive promptly at church; missing a Sabbath left quite a dissatisfied impression in Martha's journal. Ironically, May 4th, the first Sabbath of the month, denotes a disgruntled Martha as she writes, "We were not up as early this morning as usual and consequently were not in time for Sabbath School or church . . ." (McMillan 1884). Martha further notes that she hopes to rectify that with her family in the following weeks, though the very next Sabbath, she remarks with a hint of frustration, ". . . none of us quite on time" (McMillan 1884). If any of Martha's children failed to attend church due to sickness or other unstated reasons, Martha wrote it in her journal as well. On June 8, 1884, Martha records that Fannie, Clara, Homer, and Harlan attended Sabbath School, but Fred, Clayton, and Jason remained at home (McMillan 1884). The significance of attending church every Sabbath clearly reflects in Martha's entries, and while she and her children did not manage to hear every service, Martha highly valued church that she recorded the whereabouts of herself and her children each Sabbath in her concern for their continued attendance.

Considering the many entries focused on family rather than self, Martha McMillan's form of life-writing does not necessarily model the conventional style of her time. Martha paid specific attention to her children's spiritual development whether that encompassed their attendance in church or listening to bible reading and participating in catechisms in the

afternoons after church. Martha followed a literary pattern that encompassed her family's activities during the day, and as expected, each Sabbath entry devotes careful detail to the religious indulgences of that day. Martha's method of writing for each Sabbath typically consisted of first, the weather, then, the whereabouts of her children and those who either attended or missed church, the biblical text preached by Pastor Morton, and lastly, mention of the bible reading and catechism she read to her children. On May 18, Martha wrote in her journal, "Mr. Mc. heard the catechism," a seemingly exceptional occasion given the infrequency with which Martha mentioned Mr. McMillan during the bible reading and catechisms (McMillan 1884). Martha's entry form also sometimes included the book from which Martha read the catechisms to her children and had them practice reciting (McMillan 1884). One book she frequented was *Line upon Line* written by Favell Lee Mortimer in the 1800s. Martha mentioned this book throughout her Sabbath entries until she completed it on May 18, stating, "I finished reading "Line upon Line" to the children this afternoon" (McMillan 1884). Despite this, her children continued to say their catechisms each Sabbath, but Martha did not mention whether she selected another catechetical book to read to her children. If her children progressed in their catechisms, Martha documented this also. In her entry for July 27, she writes, ". . . every child recited their cat-echism and psalms and texts proper-ly and correctly . . ." (McMillan 1884). This pattern of life-writing about her children's whereabouts each Sunday morning and the ensuing bible reading and catechism continues throughout Martha's journal as she maintains the form in a way that catalogues her children's spiritual involvement and growth.

Historically, the implementation of catechizing began during early Christianity, designed to instruct future members of the church (Hurlbut et al. 169). However, due to a misconception that baptism made one a true Christian, the church decided to teach the church member

candidates the truth about the church's faith and foundation through catechism (Hurlbut et al. 169). Once the church grew with an increase of children, to prevent the confusion and embarrassment of the people's former ignorance, "all children were required to be taught the essentials of the Christian faith" (Hurlbut et al. 169). Different churches eventually wrote their own catechisms for children to recite until families could independently teach their own children. The same purpose of catechisms continued through Martha's time as an assurance that the children would learn and understand the truth of the bible. The pastor of Martha's church, Reverend Morton, stated in a sermon that one of the sins of the church had arisen from division. He informed the congregation, "While man adhered to the whole of God's truth, the church was a unit, all its members were of one heart and one mind; but when men departed from the truth, and error crept into the church, there were divisions" (Morton 139). The unity of the church relied on man's association and belief in the truth, and the instruction of such truth needed to be taught to the children as well. Martha McMillan faithfully led her children through the bible reading and catechism every afternoon so that it would be engrained in their minds, and they would know the truth. For this reason, when Martha's children successfully recited their catechisms on July 27, she expresses her joy and remarks, "May this be the rule from this day and forward – such a course I am sure none can estimate" (McMillan 1884). Martha hoped that her children would take what they learned to heart as a means of knowing and understanding the truth.

Catechizing became revolutionized during the 1500s by Martin Luther, and the same principles documented then closely resemble how Martha also taught her children. In his book *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther explored the importance of investing time into the children's spiritual state:

However it is not enough for them to comprehend and recite these parts according to the words only, but the young people should also be made to attend preaching, especially during the time which is devoted to the Catechism, that they may hear it explained and may learn to understand what every part contains, so as to be able to recite it as they have heard it, and when asked, may give a correct answer, so that the preaching may not be without profit and fruit. (Luther 5)

Luther set the precedent for catechizing as the churches in England never issued an exact definition of catechism, and as such, the principles remained seamlessly integrated with other churches centuries later. However, some churches unofficially deviated enough from each other's definition of catechizing that only a general similarity could connect them through Luther's writing (Green 13). One example comes from a symposium of a group of professors as each provides his own definition of a catechism, and while the same underlying principles remain, the wording differs significantly enough to be counted as unique. For example, one professor defines catechism as "a body of truth . . . present[ed] . . . in articulate form and proportion" while another professor claims a catechism is "a statement of Christian doctrine . . . for the purpose of being committed to memory" (Hurlbut et al. 166, 170). Luther's principles clearly still resonate within the doctrine of the catechism, and a distinct correlation exists between the principles Luther defined and Martha's method of instructing her children. Just as Martha desired for her children to attend church faithfully, she also longed to see them memorize what they had learned and recite it concisely. Martha faithfully saw to her children's catechisms each Sabbath, often ending the day's entry with, "This afternoon Bible reading & catechism" (McMillan 1884). Ulrich's analysis also touched upon the significance of spiritually investing in one's children, and she writes, "Cotton Mather was fond of saying that good mothers travailed

twice for their children, once for their physical birth, again for the spiritual” (Ulrich 23).

Likewise, Martha expended her energy in the time and effort placed into her children’s salvation and their spiritual walk thereafter. Martha committed to a schedule that assured her children would hear God’s Word every Sabbath and respond to it accordingly by reciting their catechisms. Teaching the children to devote their energy to memorizing and reciting scripture so that they might know and understand it reflected Martha’s willingness to walk her children through an enduring spiritual journey. Martha did not take her children’s time in the bible lightly as she dedicated each Sabbath afternoon specifically to the children so that they could share with her how they much further they had grown in their faith every week. The resilience of Martha’s character shows through her desire to dutifully teach her children from the bible and catechetical book.

Before catechizing took root in the household, the church educated the children through a systematic manner of teaching. In his book *The Christian’s ABC*, Ian Green writes that the catechisms in the church covered five operations, including the following:

Teaching catechumens to remember the set answers to set questions; testing their memory of those answers by oral examination; explaining to catechumens what the answers meant; testing how much they understood of what they had learnt; and encouraging catechumens to put their new knowledge and insights into practice. (Green 93)

In Martha’s journal, she writes that while she read the bible to her children, she listened or rather “heard” the catechisms every Sabbath (McMillan 1884). This is also evidenced by the appearance of Mr. McMillan during these afternoons such as on May 24, 1884; he did not necessarily participate in the catechizing, but he “heard” the children say their catechisms

(McMillan 1884). The children recited the answers to the questions offered by the catechetical book, in this case, referring to *Line upon Line*. Mortimer's book consisted of the classic catechetical question and answer style, used mostly to engage the listeners and aid their memorization of the biblical lessons they learned. For example, from *Line upon Line*, to set the story of Abraham, Mortimer writes, "Noah's sons had many children, and they had many children, and at last there were a great many people in the world. Were these people good or bad? They were bad" (Mortimer 30). The repetition of question and answer format ensured the children could easily respond to and recite their catechisms from the lessons they learned. Additionally, questions in the back of the book revisited the lessons from the bible, such as "Whom did God desire to leave his own country, and go to a land that he would show him?" (Mortimer 309). These lessons, simplified for children's comprehension, led them through stories from the bible that they might have heard but not quite understood, and Martha read to her children from one such book to engage their minds in the Word and memorize what it had to teach them.

While Martha McMillan took up household bible studies with her children, at that time, the United Presbyterian Churches were concerned whether the proper method of catechizing would lead to division between families. James Price, a pastor of the Twelfth United Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, wrote, "From the very beginning our Church has felt that since no Christian parent can delegate to another the religious training of his children, there ought to be a Bible school in every home" (Price 101). The concept of Sabbath schools led the church to believing that an organized form of biblical teaching for the youth would erase any possibility of division amongst families (Price 101). Shortly afterward, Martha McMillan sent her children to Sabbath School while she and her husband attended to church. Not all of her

children visited Sabbath School, but for those who managed to attend, Martha would record it in her journal, sometimes writing as brief a note on July 20 which says, “Fannie Fred Homer and Clara at Sabbath School” (McMillan 1884). In her journals, Martha does not display any of the Pennsylvanian pastor’s fears of congregational dissent either as she simply read to her children from a book on catechism. Whether Martha disagreed with other parents’ catechetical methods is left unstated, but she clearly led her children through their catechisms by reading *Line upon Line* to them until they successfully completed the book in late May. Martha’s Sabbath journal entries focus only on the important attendance to bible reading and catechism, and no signs of partiality are otherwise written between the lines.

Much of Martha McMillan’s time invested greatly in her children’s spiritual growth, and her journals reflect the maternal concern she had for their desire to learn about God. She longed for them to attend church, and the absence of it resulted in dissatisfaction in her day’s entry. Martha committed herself to daily life-writing, and because of that dedication, the spiritual journey of her children manifests through her eyes as she seeks to teach them. Whether the children attended Sabbath School or missed the service, Martha still led them through bible reading and catechism every Sabbath to ensure that they heard God’s Word and committed it to heart. When her children progressed in their recitations, Martha expressed her jubilation, and her motherly pride shines through the journal. As a woman eager to learn the truth, Martha devoted much of her life to her religion and passed what she learned to her children so that they might develop a similar desire as well. The catechisms became more than an opportunity for teaching; the afternoons spent together allotted Martha a chance to build upon another facet in her children’s lives, demonstrating her desire to guide them in their spiritual education. Martha McMillan portrayed a woman who sought God in the bible and church, and to prove the

significance of her beliefs, she also spiritually invested in her children so that they might one day recognize the wonder of following after the Lord and building a relationship to share with Him.

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